

Chapter 1: Realizations.

Harry was sitting alone at his tiny, scarred, desk at the Dursleys. It was one of the first times since he returned from Hogwarts that he had actually been left alone. Ron and Hermione had gone back to the Burrow to help with the preparations for Bill and Fleur's wedding. Leaning back in his chair, Harry let his gaze wander around aimlessly while he tried to figure out what Dumbledore had meant that his ability to love was the power that would enable him to defeat Voldemort.

He thought about his relationship with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Sirius, & the rest of the Weasleys. He knew that he would give his life to save any of them, but did it really mean that he loved them? Having grown up devoid of loving parents, Harry worried that he wouldn't be able to recognize what love really meant to him. Sure, he knew about the concept of love, having longed for it his entire life, but he didn't really have a strong frame of reference to base his experiences.

Ron was his first friend in the Wizarding world but their relationship had been tested over the years due to Ron's jealousy over fame and money. Harry still considered Ron as the brother that he never had. After thinking it over for a few minutes Harry realized that, he did indeed love Ron as a brother, even when he was being a git.

The next person Harry considered was Hermione. He knew that their friendship was strong and that she had never doubted him. She had always been there when he needed advice, and even when he didn't want it. Harry chuckled to himself as he remembered all of those times when Hermione would do or say something that would keep him focused and out of trouble. Hermione's faith and devotion to Harry, even when he knew he was wrong, amazed him. Shaking his head from side to side, Harry understood that Hermione's love for him was unconditional and he felt the same way towards her. She was the anchor that kept him grounded, even if she did drive him nuts occasionally.

Her relationship with Ron always puzzled him though. Hermione and Ron were always bickering and Harry often thought that it was because they had unspoken feelings for each other. Now he wasn't

so sure anymore. They had started dating after Dumbledore's funeral but it still seemed a bit forced to Harry. He just hoped that he didn't have to pick up the pieces if their relationship fell apart.

Harry had no doubts about his late godfather's love for him. Sirius had died protecting him from his own foolishness. Harry let out a stifled sob as a wave of guilt wracked his body. If only he had mastered Occlumency as Dumbledore had insisted. Harry knew that he loved Sirius and that he would carry the guilt of his death forever.

A few days ago, Harry would have said that Ginny was the one that he loved the most. It wasn't until Remus Lupin sent him a photograph of his parents during their Hogwarts days that Harry realized Ginny looked exactly like his mum.

Harry realized that he now loved Ginny like a sister and that he had pushed her away because he thought that it would protect her. Now, he was glad that he broke up with her. It gave him a bad case of the shivers when he looked at a picture of his mum side by side with one of Ginny. Harry slumped down in his chair and put his hands up to his head. Taking a deep breath to fortify his nerves, Harry knew what he had to do. He took out a quill and some parchment and began to write her a letter.

It surprised Harry when he realized how much better he felt after getting some of those things off his chest. The lump in his throat was still there because of the pain that he knew that he had caused Ginny.

Looking over to the bureau in the corner of his room Harry called softly, "Hedwig, would you please take this to Ginny Weasley?"

She stuck out her left leg and Harry secured the letter carefully and opened the window for her. Nipping him on his ear lightly, Hedwig opened her wings and soared out of his window into the night.

~AQ~

The past couple of weeks had been terrible for Ginny Weasley. The ever-growing fear of Voldemort's rising power in the absence of Dumbledore's guidance was causing everyone to feel a sense of

foreboding. Between the death of Dumbledore and breaking up with Harry, she was at her wit's end.

Ginny felt like she was just going through the motions of life but not actually living it. Some mornings she didn't even want to get out of bed but it was even worse trying to fall asleep. She kept having second thoughts about why Harry had told her that they had to stop seeing each other. Ginny knew that her entire family was in terrible danger no matter what, or where, Harry was at any given moment.

Hermione had noticed the way Ginny listlessly shuffled around during the day completing whatever task her mother assigned for her. She tried to talk to her friend about it but she always got the same, "I'm fine." that Harry had made so famous during his troublesome fifth year. Hermione decided that she was going to talk to Ginny in her room that night before bed because she hated seeing her just going through the motions of life, not actually living one.

Ginny was startled from her revelry by a tapping noise at her window. Slowly she pulled open the window and stepped back to let the beautiful snowy owl into her room. "Hello girl, how are you?" she asked.

Hedwig gave a low hoot and stuck out her leg. Ginny took the letter and slowly sat back down on her bed. She wasn't sure if she was ready to read a letter from Harry just yet. He had caused her so much pain and she was still confused about her feelings towards him. Taking a deep breath Ginny broke the seal on the letter and began to read.

Dear Ginny,

I have been the world's biggest prat. I don't know if you can ever find it in your heart to forgive me and I probably don't deserve it anyway. There are some things that I need to explain, such as why I broke up with you.

I am terrified. Everyone that has ever loved me has been killed by Voldemort and I have been blaming myself. I was afraid that he would

take you to get to me. Ron and Hermione already know all about this fear and they still won't leave me.

Something Dumbledore said to me made me realize that if I pushed everyone away then I would be giving into my fears and letting Voldemort win. While I am still fearful that you could be harmed because of me, I also realize that you are still in danger because he already knows about us because Malfoy told him last year.

While I don't expect you to forgive me, I hope that I haven't lost your friendship. I should have told you everything last year but I was afraid. There are things that I still have to do but I now realize that I will need help if I am going to succeed.

I know that I hurt you terribly and for that, I am truly sorry. I will tell you everything you want to know when I arrive at the Burrow for Bill and Fleur's wedding. If you don't want anything to do with me after that, I will understand. Just know that I will always love you.

Love,

Harry

Tears were falling silently down Ginny's cheeks. She didn't realize that she was even crying until a tear splashed down onto the letter. "He still loves me!" Ginny cried softly to Hedwig.

Hermione was worried about Ginny. Since she and Ron had returned to the Burrow to help with the wedding preparations Ginny had been keeping to herself the entire time, only speaking when someone asked her a question. She was just about to open the door to Ginny's room when she heard Ginny whisper that Harry still loved her. Smiling to herself, Hermione slowly backed away from the door to find Ron and tell him the good news.

"Ron!" whispered Hermione, "Wake up."

"Five more minutes, mum." mumbled Ron as he tried to bury himself further into his orange Chudley Cannons blanket.

Smirking to herself, Hermione leaned in close to Ron's ear and began to wiggle her fingers mimicking a spider crawling. Ron's reaction was instantaneous; he rolled over and promptly fell onto the floor at Hermione's feet wildly beating at the side of his face to remove the imagined spider.

"Bloody Hell, Hermione! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?" yelled Ron when he looked up to see her laughing silently at his expense.

"I'm sorry Ron. I couldn't resist. Besides, you look so cute when you're swatting the invisible spiders away." Hermione blushed slightly when she realized that she had said that last bit aloud.

Ron's ears were a bit pink as he blurted out, "Hermione, why did you wake me up? Is something wrong? Is Harry ok? How is Ginny?"

"Ron, slow down. Everyone is fine, maybe even better than fine if Harry has finally realized a few things." Hermione stated simply.

A look of confusion appeared on Ron's face before Hermione took pity on him and began telling him about what Dumbledore had mentioned to Harry about the prophecy and the power that the Dark Lord knows not, the ability to love and be loved.

Harry was laying on his small bed inside Number 4 Privet listening to the sounds of his cousin and uncle snoring. 'How did Aunt Petunia sleep through that racket, Harry wondered?'

He felt relaxed, like a large weight had been lifted off his chest, for the first time in ages. Hedwig had returned with a short note from Ginny earlier that evening. At first, Harry was terrified that Ginny would send him a howler, or worse, not reply at all. His fears turned out to be unjustified because Ginny's short letter was more than he could have ever hoped.

Dear Harry,

I forgive you, come home soon so we can talk.

Love,

Ginny

Harry sat there completely gob smacked at first. He had never understood what it meant to have a family that would forgive and love him, and to have a place that he could call home. That Ginny was willing to forgive him shook Harry to the core of his soul. It also made him feel that much worse because he knew that it was his own short sightedness that had caused this whole situation.

He also realized that he owed Hermione an apology as well. She had stood by him for the past five years without once wavering in her support of him regardless of how insensitive he was being.

Realizing that it was late, Harry decided to get ready for bed. However, sleep never came easy for him. When he was younger, the nightmares were about his mistreatment at the hands of the Dursleys. After he went to Hogwarts, the nightmares were still there but they were replaced by a different type of terror. Voldemort was the primary cause of the horrors in his dreams, even if he was not in every one. Unfortunately, each year he spent at Hogwarts brought with it a new nightmare to add to his growing collection.

The nightmares he was currently experiencing were from the cave with the Horcrux and Dumbledore's death on top of the Astronomy tower. His older nightmares never really went away but they didn't have the power over him that they used to. In time, he would get used to this new set of nightmares too.

They still left him shaken when he awoke in a cold sweat. This evening's dream started out no different from the other ones. He was frozen under his invisibility cloak, powerless to stop the horror of seeing Dumbledore's body fall over the ramparts towards the grounds below.

In his dreams, Dumbledore always gave Harry a look of betrayal as he was hit with the killing curse. It seemed that bright flash of green light that had changed his life when he was a baby would forever haunt him. So many of Harry's loved ones had died at the monster's

hands that Harry knew that even without the prophecy hanging over his head that he would want to be the one to kill Voldemort.

Just as the light hit Dumbledore in his dream, everything shifted. Harry felt a sense of calm come over him and then he found himself standing in a doorway facing the back of a beautiful woman. As she turned to her right Harry was able to see the tiny infant in her arms that had a shock of messy raven hair and startlingly bright emerald green eyes. He could not identify the woman but he felt that he knew her.

The only color in this part of his dream was the green of the baby's eyes. As Harry stepped into the room all he could focus on was the tiny little infant in its mother's arms reaching out to him. As Harry stretched out his hand, he awoke as soon as his fingers touched the child's tiny ones.

Harry was breathing heavily and sweating a little but it was not like the cold sweats that he got from his usual nightmares. He desperately clung to the images in this dream so that they would never fade from his memory.

As he was going over the scene in his mind again Harry realized that what he was feeling was unconditional love, for the woman and the child; their child. This was what Dumbledore meant when he told Harry that he would have a power that Voldemort did not understand, the love for his wife and child...his own family.

It was that dream, more than anything, that Harry had been thinking about over the past month that finally caused the biggest change in Harry. The belief that he had something to look forward to, something that he wanted more than anything else in the entire world, focused Harry's mind and gave him a true sense of purpose and a long term goal beyond just killing Tom Riddle.

Harry understood that in a way he did pity Tom Riddle. He no longer thought of him as Voldemort because he realized that it was just a name made up to hide a scared, lonely, man and his insecurities. Dumbledore had only called Tom by the name of Voldemort in front of others, people that didn't know who he really was. This business of

people being too afraid to say a name had to stop. Saying You-Know-Who instead of Voldemort was completely ridiculous.

Harry wanted people to start calling Voldemort by his given name, Tom, and to do that he was going to need help from someone he absolutely loathed. Rita Skeeter.

Chapter 2: Owl post and revelations.

Gritting his teeth Harry got up from his little bed and picked up a fresh piece of parchment and a quill. Writing to Rita Skeeter was not something that Harry wanted to do but it needed to be done.

Ms. Skeeter,

I was hoping that you would be able to help me with a project this summer. It will be very dangerous for you but also very lucrative. If you are interested, I would like to meet you inside Gringotts on August 1, at 12pm. If not, I am sure that there are dozens of other reporters that would be more than willing to help me.

Harry Potter

Grabbing a second piece of parchment Harry started to pen a letter to the first Goblin that took him to his vault at Gringotts.

Griphook,

First of all, I wanted to thank you for taking me to my vault and for explaining Wizarding money to me in my first year. I was hoping that you would be able to arrange for a private meeting room for me on August 1, at 12pm. I am willing to pay for your time and the room.

If possible, I would also like to meet with you afterwards to go over the holdings in my vault. I have not been down to visit since the death of my godfather, Sirius Black, so I know that there are some things that I must take care of.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

‘I’ll just send these off with Hedwig as soon as she wakes up’ thought Harry as he looked over at his faithful owl. Currently she was sleeping with her head tucked under her wing after a night of hunting in Surrey.

Harry glanced over at his clock and noticed that it was just after seven in the morning and that the Dursleys would be getting up soon. Stripping off his shirt and grabbing a change of clothes, Harry stepped out of his room to head to the shower before his whale of a cousin, Dudley, could use up all of the hot water.

Just as Harry stepped out of his bedroom door, he heard a gasp from the end of the hallway. Spinning quickly and turning to the side, Harry looked up to see his Aunt Petunia staring at him wide-eyed and pale. She took a step forward with a look on her face that shocked Harry. It was a look full of guilt.

“Harry, what happened to you? Where did you get all of those scars?”

It took Harry a moment to remember that he wasn't wearing a shirt so he quickly pulled his towel over his shoulders and leveled a glare at his aunt before replying, “Why would you care? You and Uncle Vernon haven't been the most loving people the past 16 years.” Without waiting for a reply, Harry walked into the bathroom and closed the door leaving a shocked and confused Petunia in the hallway.

Harry leaned against the shower wall and let the water stream down his back as he tried to gather his thoughts about his encounter with Aunt Petunia. ‘Why did she feel guilty? Did she actually care about him?’ Harry felt that he really needed to talk to someone about what happened but Hermione wouldn't be picking him up to take him to the Burrow until a few days before his birthday next week.

After drying himself off and putting on some clean clothes, Harry stepped out into the hall so he could head downstairs to start cooking breakfast. When he opened the door to the kitchen, he got the second shock of the day.

His Aunt was busy cooking breakfast and had already set the table. Not knowing what to do, Harry simply stood there with his mouth slightly hanging open.

“Harry, have a seat at the table, breakfast should be ready in a few minutes. Help yourself to some coffee or juice and some toast if you would like.” said Petunia without looking up from the stove.

Harry was confused. It was like waking up in a completely different universe but he was still the same. Tentatively Harry asked, “Aunt Petunia, is something wrong?”

She glanced up at him from the stove and gave him a small smile.

“Nothing is wrong, Harry. There are a few things that I would like to talk to you about after Vernon and Dudley leave for the day. Would that be alright with you?”

“Oh. Okay, Aunt Petunia.” said Harry quickly as his cousin came pounding down the stairs. He finished his breakfast before Uncle Vernon even made it to the table and retreated to the safety of his room.

~AQ~

When Harry entered his room, he found Hedwig perched on his desk looking at the stack of outgoing post. Chuckling softly, Harry asked, “Looking for a job girl? I have a few letters that need to be delivered. Would you please wait a moment while I write one more note?” Hedwig hooted softly and flew over to her perch for a quick drink of water.

Dear Hermione,

Would it be possible for you to come to my aunt and uncles house tomorrow? There are a few things that I need to take care of that I could use your help with.

Sincerely,

Harry

Gathering up the letters for Hedwig, Harry walked over to her perch and began fastening them to her leg. "Please go to Hermione first, then Gringotts, and finally Rita Skeeter."

With an affectionate nip of his finger, Hedwig lifted off from her perch and flew out the open window. "Be safe girl." Harry said softly as he watched her outline fade into the distance.

After hearing Dudley and Uncle Vernon leave the house for work, Harry decided that he couldn't put off talking to his aunt any longer so he headed downstairs. Stepping into the living room, Harry noticed that his aunt had set up a tea tray with service for two and that she was sitting on the couch waiting for him. With a small sigh of resignation, Harry sat down on the love seat opposite his aunt and waited for her to begin talking.

"Harry, there are some things that I need to know about what will happen once you turn seventeen." Petunia said as she clutched her cup of tea in her hands.

He was a bit shocked but then realized that his aunt was scared about what could happen to her family when he left for good. "What do you know about the protection that Dumbledore placed on the house when you took me in almost sixteen years ago?" asked Harry tentatively.

After a short pause, Petunia told him about the blood protection and his being in the house during the summer to recharge the wards, and about how they kept the family safe.

'That was interesting,' thought Harry. 'She knows more about the magical world than she let on, including that little slip during the summer before my fifth year.' With a hard look at his aunt, Harry whispered, "You seem to know much more about my world than I realized. How many other secrets have you been keeping?"

Petunia shivered at his tone and the look that he gave her as he was speaking. Harry's face was a frozen, emotionless mask, but it was his eyes that truly scared her. He looked completely capable of cold-

blooded murder, and there seemed to be a slight breeze in the room even though all of the windows remained closed.

‘What had he been through to become this hardened,’ thought Petunia? “H-H-Harry, I have some things that Dumbledore gave me that belonged to your parents. He had them put into magical storage at Gringotts after I told him that I didn’t want them kept in our house.”

As she finished this statement, she produced a small golden key with the Gringotts seal emblazoned on the top and placed it on the coffee table that was between them.

“How long?” croaked Harry in a strangled voice. He was not sure he wanted to hear the answer, but he needed to know.

Petunia opened her mouth as if to reply but then shut it abruptly. She tried to tell him again but faltered and covered her mouth with one of her bony hands. She looked like a deer caught in the headlights and was too afraid to move or say anything.

“TELL THE TRUTH!” shouted Harry, with authority, while looking directly into his aunt’s eyes. The tea set started to rattle and shake as his magic began to rise up inside of him in anger.

Petunia felt her mind invaded by a foreign presence and her memories started spilling forth, playing out right in front of her eyes. Her head began to pound, and her eyes started to glaze over from the mental attack as Harry delved deeper looking for answers.

The feeling of being inside of his aunt’s mind shocked Harry momentarily before he realized that he had used Legilimency without saying an incantation or using his wand. With renewed purpose, he began sifting through her memories looking for the conversation between Dumbledore and his aunt.

When he finally pulled out of the memory and left Petunia’s mind, Harry’s heart filled with hatred and pure rage towards his remaining family. “You have had this the entire time that I have lived here and never once saw fit to tell me about it?” he hissed menacingly.

Petunia could only nod in agreement, she was too afraid to say anything because she thought that Harry might kill her on the spot.

Harry grabbed the key and stood up to leave the room. As he started to go up the steps, he stopped and turned to his Aunt and said, "You and the rest of the Dursleys should leave the house before my birthday. Tell no one where you are going, just leave. If you are here on my seventeenth birthday, you will be murdered by Voldemort or his followers because the wards are going to fall. I'm leaving tomorrow for good. Make sure that all of you stay out of my way until I am gone."

Angrily, Harry trudged up to the smallest bedroom and began packing up his belongings.

Chapter 3: New Beginnings and What's Right.

After finishing packing his belongings, Harry collapsed onto the tiny bed and lay there staring at the ceiling for what seemed like hours. Sometime during the night, Harry had gotten up and taken off his clothes before climbing back onto the bed wearing only a pair of boxers.

His dreams were starting out as usual, the image of Snape leaning over Dumbledore right before he killed him. Just as the brilliant green flash from the killing curse left Snape's wand, Harry's nightmare shifted into the dream of the beautiful witch holding a tiny baby in her arms, their child.

Harry stood in the doorway in his dream trying to memorize everything about his surroundings that he could. Then he heard it for the first time, her soft, lilting, voice that was singing to the infant in her arms. Harry could not make out the words but he recognized the melody of the song. Her voice was angelic but because he was too far away, he couldn't identify the woman.

She was far too beautiful to be anything except a woman. Tentatively, Harry took a step forward towards them. She still had her back to him when he realized that she wasn't wearing a top. Harry was feeling overwhelmed with emotions and he started to tremble in his sleep. His breathing quickened and his heart started pounding in his chest. Swallowing nervously, Harry took another step closer towards them and he reached out his hand to touch her shoulder.

Just as his hand made contact with her bare shoulder, he felt a jolt and then he was encompassed by a feeling of love. The beautiful witch took a step backwards and leaned into his touch.

~AQ~

Hermione had just stepped inside of the door to Harry's room when he started breathing heavily and moving around in his sleep. Fearing that he was having another nightmare, she quickly strode over to the bed and pulled him into a hug while softly calling out to him, "Harry? It's okay, please wake up!"

His body tensed for a few seconds before he relaxed into her embrace. She was running one of her hands through his hair trying to calm him down while making soothing noises. As his breathing slowly returned to normal, Hermione realized that Harry had fallen back into a deep sleep.

Looking down at his face, she leaned down and placed a tender kiss on his scar before softly disentangling herself and covering him with the sheet that was bunched-up around his feet.

Kneeling down next to his bed, Hermione noticed that he looked more peaceful than she could ever remember seeing him from recent memory. His face was relaxed and the lines of tension around his mouth and on his forehead were gone.

Deciding that it would be best to let him sleep for a little while longer, she stepped out of the room and quietly closed the door. Once she was in the back yard Hermione quickly Apparated to Diagon Alley to grab some food before returning to Privet Drive.

~AQ~

Harry's dream drifted away into the mists of his mind when he felt the warm embrace and he dropped off into a very restful sleep.

When he awoke a while later, it was to the smell of bacon and eggs in his room. Snatching his glasses and putting them on his face, he quickly recognized Hermione sitting at his desk munching on a piece of toast while reading the Daily Prophet.

"Good morning. I was wondering when you were going to wake up." stated Hermione with a small grin on her face.

Harry smiled back at her and said, "Morning, Hermione. Thanks for bringing breakfast, I really didn't fancy going downstairs to cook anything after my little meeting with Petunia yesterday."

Frowning slightly at Harry's tone regarding his aunt, Hermione looked over at him and intoned, "Harry, I haven't seen your relatives all

morning. I had to let myself in after no one answered the door, it was unlocked too. What happened yesterday?"

"Petunia and I had a nice long discussion about blood wards and my parent's belongings that she has kept hidden from me for the past sixteen years. It didn't end well though, she wouldn't admit to how long she had been hiding their possessions from me and I sort of used Legilimency on her to get the answers." Harry said after swallowing a bite of his eggs.

Hermione let out a small gasp as Harry mentioned using Legilimency on his Aunt. "I thought that you didn't know how to perform Legilimency, Harry?"

"Actually, I think I may have a natural talent for it, or it is a skill that Tom passed to me like he did with Parseltongue." Harry said before taking a bite of his toast. Swallowing, he continued, "The thing is, I didn't even use a wand or say the incantation. I was looking right into her eyes, and I demanded to know the truth about how long she had my parent's things in storage. The next thing that I knew, I was sifting through her memories very quickly until I found the one that I wanted."

Hermione was worrying her bottom lip between her teeth in thought before she answered, "Harry, it could be a combination of both. Either way, we should take some time and develop your skills in Legilimency and Occlumency. They would be really helpful in our quest to find the items that we are looking for."

"Who am I going to practice on, Hermione?" Harry asked. Wiping his mouth on a napkin, he said, "It's not like I can just walk up to people and start scanning their thoughts, especially wizards, because they could tell what I am doing and it isn't exactly moral to invade someone else's mind."

"You can practice on me, Harry." Before Harry could reply in the negative, Hermione continued by saying, "Harry, I'm a natural Occlumens, Dumbledore tested me himself last year. I don't know how or why I'm a natural, but Dumbledore mentioned that it's

because I have a highly ordered mind with a near photographic memory.”

Harry looked at Hermione with his mouth hanging slightly open before he replied, “Thanks a lot, Hermione. You don’t have to do this you know. If I ever succeed in breaking through your defenses, I will end up seeing some things that you may want kept private. I’ll try not to view those memories but it’s hard to control most of the time. When I accidentally broke into Snape’s mind during our fifth year, I saw him witnessing a fight between his parents when he was a little boy.”

Hermione gave Harry a small smile before replying, “Harry, I trust you and I know that you wouldn’t bring up memories like that if you could help it. We should pick up some books on Occlumency and Legilimency when we visit Diagon Alley later.”

~AQ~

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, Harry asked Hermione to Apparate him to Diagon Alley. “Let’s head over to Gringotts first, Hermione. I can get a few things sorted out and retrieve some gold from my vault so we can get those books. I would also like to visit a wizard optometrist to get some new glasses if possible. These old things aren’t very durable.” Harry said.

“You also need some new clothes, Harry. I mean you look good in your Quidditch robes so why hide it under those baggy things you are wearing now?” Hermione’s face turned a bright shade of pink when she realized that she had said the last part aloud.

“And just how long have you been checking me out in my Quidditch robes?” Harry said with a small, teasing, smile on his face.

“Uh, right, we should really get going. Lots to do today you know.” Hermione said in a very high-pitched voice.

Slightly embarrassed and still a light shade of pink, Hermione grabbed Harry’s hand and turned on the spot. They arrived in the alley just behind the Leaky Cauldron with a small pop.

"You're really getting good at side-along apparition Hermione." Harry stated, letting her off the hook for now as they began their walk towards Gringotts.

"Thanks, Harry. I actually find it easier when apparating with you then when I do it on my own. I think that you're helping with the destination and I'm never that quiet." Hermione stated simply.

"I never really thought about it before but when I Apparated Dumbledore back from the cave to Hogsmeade, I had to do everything by myself." In a quiet whisper and with tears in his eyes, Harry said, "He, he was so weak...he couldn't help me at all. It was all I could do just to keep him standing so I concentrated as hard as I could and took us both back to the Three Broomsticks."

Hermione stepped closer to Harry and swept him into a gentle hug, before leading him over to a small waiting room just off the lobby in Gringotts. "Harry, it's okay, you did everything that you could that night. Just getting Dumbledore back to Hogsmeade was a big accomplishment. I can't Apparate that far on my own and you did it carrying an injured person."

Rubbing his back comfortingly, she said, "You really are a powerful wizard, Harry. There are things that you make look easy but are a stretch for most other wizards and witches to even attempt."

Harry was looking down at his hands on the table as he spoke quietly, "I'm nothing special, Hermione. I mean, take a look at my grades, nothing great there."

"Harry, please look at me." Once Harry brought his eyes up to look into Hermione's, she reached out, clasped her hands on top of his, and began speaking, "I know that you've been hiding your talents at Hogwarts so you can divert attention away from yourself. The question is, why? Is this something left over from the Dursley's abuse or is it to make others underestimate you?"

Harry's eyes widened in shock at her revelation. Coming to a decision, he pulled a wand from his sleeve that Hermione didn't recognize and with a quick flick of his wrist, she felt a rush of magic. The lock on the

door clicked, and then the background noise from the lobby disappeared.

“What was that? You’re going to get into serious trouble for using magic before you’re seventeen!” Hermione said in a harsh whisper.

Holding up his hand to forestall further questions, Harry flicked his wrist a few more times before putting the strange wand back into his sleeve. His tone was serious as he said, “How did you know about the Dursleys, and when did you figure that out?”

“Oh, Harry. I’m so sorry.” Hermione now had tears in her eyes as she looked up at him. Her voice broke a little as she began speaking again, “I figured out the part about the Dursleys during our third year. I just didn’t say anything about them because I figured you would never bring it up and that it was probably a very sensitive topic.”

Harry’s mouth was hanging open slightly and Hermione reached across the table, lifted his chin up to close it, and said with a chuckle, “Flies, Harry, flies. I figured out the hiding in plain sight part during our fifth year. I never saw you actually practice the spells that you taught us during the DA. You just performed them as if you had been doing them for ages.”

Pausing to gather her thoughts, she continued, speaking quietly, “It was such a horrible year for you but your grades on your O.W.L.S. were very good, minus the two obvious ones where the exams were interrupted. So why did you throw your O.W.L.S.?”

“You really are the smartest witch of our age, you know that don’t you?” Harry proudly said with a smile before his demeanor changed and his physical appearance began to shift. His body grew a few inches and he filled out his baggy clothes. His hair was now just below his shoulders, it was still a little wild in the back but it framed his face and appeared more styled.

To complete the look he removed his glasses and looked up at Hermione’s astonished face. Reaching across the table, he returned the favor and used his index finger to gently close Hermione’s mouth while saying, “Flies, Hermione, flies.”

"You're a Metamorphmagus!" Hermione whispered excitedly before she got a contemplative look on her face as she drifted through her memories. "Oh, I should have seen that ages ago when you mentioned that you hadn't had a haircut since your Aunt Petunia cut it all off and it grew back overnight. I guess that I just assumed that you were getting your haircut during the school year. When did you figure out that you were a Metamorphmagus Harry?" she finished in a rush.

Harry smiled at her as he spoke, "I figured it out during our fourth year actually. It took me most of that year to learn to control my abilities. I didn't realize that I was unconsciously keeping my appearance the same." He paused for a moment while he reminisced about that discovery. Smiling depreciatively, he said, "It came as quite a shock when I found out that I could control it and discovered what I really looked like.

He almost laughed at the expression on Hermione's face; it was a mixture of excitement and eagerness. Continuing, he said softly, "After I figured that out I decided that I would be safer looking the way that everyone had grown accustomed to seeing me; an undersized, average wizard, with messy hair and bad eyesight."

"Wow. I mean, wow. How many people know what you really look like, Harry?" said an astonished Hermione.

"Only two people have ever seen my real form besides myself." Harry said simply.

"So Ginny and I are the only ones that know what you look like?" Hermione asked.

Shaking his head in the negative, Harry whispered, "No, just you know, now. The only other person that I revealed myself to was Sirius during Christmas of our fifth year while we were staying at Grimmauld Place. He had been helping me by sending me a list of spells that weren't taught at Hogwarts."

Tears sprung to his eyes as he choked out sadly, "Merlin, I miss him."

Hermione was not expecting that bit of news and the shock of it shown clearly on her face. Tentatively she asked, "Harry, what are you going to tell Ginny?"

With a grim look on his face, Harry pulled a worn photograph from the back pocket of his pants and silently handed it over to Hermione.

"Where did you get this picture of you and Ginny? Colin would have shown me this for sure." The confusion in Hermione's voice was evident.

Taking the photograph back from Hermione and setting it on the table in front of her, Harry smoothed out the edges before saying reverently, "Hermione, that picture is of my parents when they were at Hogwarts. Remus sent it to me last week. He discovered it while going through some of Sirius' things in his bedroom."

All Hermione could manage was a tiny exclamation of sorrow and understanding as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

"I do love Ginny and I would do anything to keep her safe. However, I love her like a sister and a friend. When I pushed her away it was for a variety of reasons, all of them wrong, but I am glad that I did end the relationship. I was going to show her the picture and explain everything to her when we visit the Burrow next week. I just hope that she understands better after seeing this photo." Stopping to collect himself, Harry said miserably, "I don't want to hurt her more than I already have."

Taking his hands in hers, Hermione looked at Harry and said warmly, "I know that this is a really difficult burden for you to endure but I will be with you the entire time." before pulling him into a loving hug.

When Hermione pulled Harry into a tight embrace, he began weeping. He cried for the loss of his parents, Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, and his own innocence. Hermione was shocked at first but she just held on to Harry tightly and whispered comforting words until his sobs abated.

“Thank you for trusting me enough to show me what you really look like and to open up to me.” Hermione whispered into Harry’s ear. Pulling back from him so she could look into his eyes Hermione placed her hand on his cheek, and said lovingly, “I am so proud of you Harry, for doing what is right and not what is easy.”

Chapter 4: Wands and Wills.

After taking a few minutes to compose her thoughts, Hermione's eyes narrowed and she looked pointedly at Harry, "Now are you going to tell me how you didn't get into trouble for using magic and where did you get that other wand?"

Harry let out a low chuckle and replied, "I didn't think that you would forget to ask about that. Anyone can perform magic inside of Gringotts and it will not be detected by the ministry. There is too much magic in the area, sort of like Hogwarts. Also, in a magical house the ministry can tell that magic has been performed but not the specific person."

In an instant Hermione's face scrunched up into a scowl as she figured out the ramifications of Harry's statement. "Do you mean to tell me that only muggleborn witches or wizards ever receive warnings from the ministry for using magic?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. It is really a nasty bit of legislation, isn't it? It shows us how bigoted the ministry really is towards muggleborns. I'm not sure what it would take to make them change their views though." Harry said contemplatively.

"How about starting a petition to change the underage magic laws? Ooh, I just know the Ministry would throw it out without even reading it!" Hermione groaned out in frustration as her anger started to build.

"I don't know Hermione; I think that it's going to take much more than just a simple petition to change things in the Ministry. Hmm perhaps.... Let's just let this sit for a while, I'm sure that something will come to us eventually.

Giving him a pointed look, she said, "Okay, Harry. Now tell me about your new wand."

"It's not new, it was Dumbledore's wand. I picked it up when I was kneeling on the ground next to his body." Harry said in a low whisper. "Everyone was in shock and I saw his wand a few feet away from where he had landed. After retrieving the fake Horcrux, I discretely

pocketed his wand before Ginny led me away from his body. I was very surprised when I discovered that I could use his wand as easily as my original one. It also solves the Priori Incantatum effect with the matching cores when I duel with Voldemort again.”

Hermione looked intently into Harry’s eyes and she seemed to come to a decision, “Harry, I think we need to get me a second wand and then start gathering anything that could help us so we can start getting ready for the upcoming war. We can do this Harry, I know you can stop him and I’ll do everything that I can to make sure that you succeed.”

“Thank you Hermione. I know that I can always count on you. That is why I decided to show you what I really look like.” Harry closed his eyes for a moment and he spoke so softly that Hermione almost did not hear him, “I’ve kept so much bottled up for so long and I really need to get some things off of my chest.”

Harry opened his eyes again and gazed into Hermione’s as he said, “I don’t want there to be anymore secrets between us.”

Slowly Hermione stood up and made her way over to Harry. She pulled him into a warm embrace and whispered, “When you’re ready, I’ll be there for you.”

“Thanks, Hermione.” After a few seconds, Harry’s body began to shrink, and she stepped back to watch the final transformation and she handed him his glasses without saying a word. Harry stood up and held out a hand to help her up from a kneeling position and said, “Let’s get going there are a few things that we really need to get finished today.”

Harry cancelled the spells on the room and they walked out into the lobby of Gringotts and headed up to an available goblin. “Excuse me sir, I would like to make a withdrawal from my vault please.” Harry said to the goblin while handing over his vault key.

The goblin took a moment to inspect the key before speaking, “Mr. Potter, there are a few things that need your attention if you have a few moments to spare.”

“Uh, sure. I have an appointment with Griphook scheduled for tomorrow afternoon though.” Harry answered in a slightly bewildered tone.

“Ah, I see. Did you request him or did Gringotts assign him to the task?” the goblin asked with a hint of curiosity.

“I sent him a letter a few days ago because he took me down to my vault the first time that I visited Gringotts and he was the only goblin that I have ever really met.” stated Harry simply.

The goblin sat there with a slightly stunned look on his face before he said, “Please wait here, I’ll be right back with Griphook.” and he walked off leaving a confused pair of humans staring at his back.

“Harry, what’s going on?” asked Hermione.

Frowning, Harry answered, “I don’t know. I did ask Griphook to reserve a conference room for me tomorrow so we could meet with Rita Skeeter and to go over my inheritance from Sirius afterwards.”

As Harry looked up, he noticed two goblins walking towards them. Stepping forward and extending his hand Harry said; “It’s good to see you again, Griphook. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me on such short notice.”

The goblin hesitated for a moment before stretching out his hand to clasp Harry’s in a firm handshake. “Not many people can recognize a goblin, especially one that they haven’t seen in five years Mr. Potter.” Griphook said.

“Oh, I didn’t know that. I recognized you instantly. You made quite the first impression on me when I was eleven. Please call me Harry,” gesturing towards his best friend, he said pleasantly, “and this is Hermione Granger.”

Hermione stepped forward and extended her hand to Griphook and said, “Pleased to meet you, Griphook. It’s a pleasure.”

Griphook clasped her hand with a look of surprise and said, "Like wise. Please follow me to the conference room and we can get down to business."

After settling in the conference room Griphook pulled out a large folder and began going over the items that were left to Harry by Sirius and Dumbledore. Sirius had left Harry everything from the Black estate and Dumbledore had given him some books and a few other magical items.

Noticing the look on Mr. Potter's face, Griphook asked, "Would you like to visit your vaults now Mr. Potter?"

Surprised, Harry asked, "Vaults? How many do I have now Griphook?"

"Three, Mr. Potter. Your trust vault, the Potter family vault, and the Black family vault. The items that Mr. Dumbledore left you have been placed into your trust vault." Griphook stated simply while looking over the folder detailing Harry's accounts.

In a concerned voice, Harry said, "Do I need to have three vaults or can I just combine them all into one large one? What type of vault should I get if you think that I should combine everything?"

"I would recommend two high security vaults Mr. Potter; one vault for all of your money and a second one for all other assets." Griphook spoke with authority.

Slightly overwhelmed, Harry said, "Okay, please make those changes but could we go down to my vaults today? I would also like to set up a will before we finish today."

"Very well Mr. Potter. I will get the paperwork for the will and we can complete it after you visit your vaults." Griphook stood up from his chair and beckoned Harry and Hermione to follow him down to the carts that would take them down to his vaults.

Hermione touched Harry's arm and to get his attention, "Harry, I can wait here while you visit your vaults. I don't want to intrude."

Stopping to look over at Hermione, Harry smiled at her before speaking in a very low whisper, "I don't want there to be any more secrets between us Hermione. Besides, I may need your help to sort through some of the items in the vaults." Curious, he asked her, "Have you ever been down to a vault before?"

Hermione shook her head no and followed Harry over to the cart.

He helped her in and climbed in next to her. "You are going to love this Hermione." Harry said with a huge smirk on his face. "We're ready, Griphook."

The cart shot off at tremendous speed into the tunnels eliciting a gasp from Hermione and a whoop of laughter from Harry. After a long ride deeper underneath Gringotts than Harry had ever been before they pulled to a stop in front of the Black family vault. "Hermione how is it that you enjoyed that cart ride but you hate flying?" Harry asked her.

"I've always loved roller coasters since I was a little girl but flying is different. You aren't on the ground or inside of a cart. I feel safer inside of the cart than I do on the back of a broom." Hermione said simply with one hand on her hip.

"Okay. Perhaps I should take you flying sometime on my Firebolt." Harry paused when he saw the look on Hermione's face before he continued, "Oh, come on. I won't do any crazy Quidditch moves with you on my broom. I just want to show you that flying can be wonderfully relaxing."

Upon seeing her look of complete disbelief, Harry chuckled and whispered conspiratorially, "Would you like to know another little secret of mine?" When Hermione nodded, he resumed speaking. "Quidditch isn't my favorite activity in the Wizarding world. It's flying and the freedom that comes with being up in the air. I think that the game itself is a little dangerous, great for an adrenaline rush, but not the safest sport out there." Seeing her look of surprise, chuckling, he said, "Please don't repeat that near Ron though, he would have a fit if he ever knew that."

Smiling back at Harry, Hermione said, "I won't say anything to anyone about that, Harry. Thanks for sharing that with me and I may take you up on that offer to fly. But you have to promise that you won't do anything dangerous with me on the broom."

"Okay, I promise. I think we are ready to enter the vault now, Griphook." Harry said as he turned to address the Goblin.

Griphook opened the door and Harry and Hermione just stood there with identical looks of shock on their faces while staring at the huge mounds of gold galleons.

After a few moments, Harry broke out into fits of laughter causing Hermione to look at him in confusion and with a touch of annoyance at his antics.

Seeing the look on Hermione's face, Harry did his best to compose himself before saying, "That's too funny. Dumbledore told me that Sirius left me a fair bit of gold when he died but this is beyond anything that I could have imagined."

Turning to Griphook Harry asked, "How much gold is in here?"

"I don't have an exact number Mr. Potter but I would guess several million gold galleons plus however many sickles and knuts on top of that." Griphook said with an air of boredom as he looked around the large vault.

Shocked, Harry asked, "How much is a million galleons in pounds?"

In a businesslike tone, Griphook stated, "One million galleons is approximately five million pounds, sterling, based upon the current exchange rate."

Hermione had stayed silent during the entire exchange but now she had a thoughtful look on her face. Stepping over to Harry, she whispered into his ear, "I think that you should move some of this into a muggle bank in case you ever need to leave the Wizarding World."

Nodding in agreement, Harry said, "That's a great idea Hermione."

Turning to face Griphook, Harry said formally, "I would like to get a certified bank draft for two million galleons converted into muggle currency. Please take the money from this vault."

With a smile on his face, he said to Hermione, "I think that Sirius would have loved the thought of me converting some of the Black family fortune into muggle currency."

Hermione had stepped over to the side of the vault and was examining some of the items that were lining the shelves on the wall. As she was browsing through them, she noticed an ornate locket with a large 'S' emblazoned in the center. Excited, she said, "Harry! Come here, quick!"

Walking over to where she was standing, Harry looked at the items on the shelf she was pointing to. His gaze froze when he saw the locket.

Frustrated, Harry quietly said, "All this time we have been looking for the locket and it was in here, just waiting for someone to retrieve it. Good job, Hermione. That's going to save us a lot of searching. I was afraid that Mundungus had stolen and pawned it already."

"We should get moving so we can see the other vaults. We can come back and take a more thorough inventory later." Hermione said as she took Harry's hand and began leading him over to the cart.

Once they were seated, Griphook started the cart for a short ride to the main Potter Family Vault. The Potter Vault was about the same size as the Black Family Vault but it contained less gold and more items and heirlooms.

"Wow. I never knew that my parents were that well off." Harry commented as he was staring around the vault. Stepping completely inside, Harry began to walk through the aisles of heirlooms and books. "Grab any books or items that you think could help us Hermione." Harry called over his shoulder to her as he continued down the rows.

At the end of one of the rows, Harry spotted something that brought a smile to his face and a few tears to his eyes. It was his parent's wedding rings and a photo album from their wedding. The album was a bit damaged, Harry suspected that it was from the destruction of Godric's Hollow, but it didn't really matter to him. He was just happy to have the photographs.

Reverently, he put his parent's rings onto a gold chain that was on one of the other shelves and put it around his neck, feeling happier than he had in a while.

Hermione had finally made her way over to Harry and she was beaming at him. Happily, she said, "I have something that I think you are going to really like. I found your parent's wands, and some from your other relatives, in a case at the other side of the vault." Smiling, she handed him their wands.

Smiling in return, he said, "Thanks. I always wondered what happened to their wands." Reverently, Harry pulled his father's wand out of its box. He did not get that warm feeling like he did from his own wand but he knew that this wand would work for him in a pinch. His mum's wand wasn't perfect either, but he knew that it would work for him too.

It was Hermione's response to his mother's wand that surprised him. She was completely compatible with the wand. Harry smiled at Hermione and said, "It looks like you have a second wand now."

He noticed that Hermione was going to give the wand back but he wrapped his hands around her hand that was holding the wand as he spoke, "The wand chooses the witch or wizard. I'm honored that you are compatible with my mother's wand and I know that you will use it well."

Hermione was smiling with tears in her eyes because she knew how precious Harry considered anything that belonged to his parents. Choked with emotion, she said, "Thank you. I know how much this wand means to you and I'll cherish it forever."

Turning towards the vault door, Harry said, "Come on, we need to see what Dumbledore put into storage for Petunia all of those years ago."

Just as Harry was turning to leave the vault, he noticed a tapestry hanging on the wall. It looked very similar to the one hanging in number twelve Grimmauld Place. Walking over to the tapestry, Harry realized that it was his family tree. Awed, he asked, "Is it safe to shrink this and take it with us?"

Thinking it over briefly, she said, "I think so. Otherwise, how would your parents have managed to get it down here in the first place?" Hermione was looking over the names on the tapestry when she noticed that the Potter name changed to Peverell hundreds of years ago.

Curious, she asked, "Have you ever heard of the Peverell's, Harry?" When he shook his head, no, she continued, "I think that we are going to have to research them a bit more so you can find out about your family history."

Wistfully, Harry said, "I'd like that. I've never known anything about my relatives and this tapestry would be a good starting point. Why don't we just copy the names and dates down rather than take the tapestry with us? I don't have a place that I would like to hang the tapestry yet."

Hermione pulled out a notebook and a pen and began copying down the names and dates. Noticing that Harry was watching her while she copied everything down, she asked, "What?"

"You're using a pen and notebook rather than parchment." Harry said, pointing out the obvious.

Surprised, she answered, "Of course I am. Do you know how hard it is to write with a quill while holding a notebook upright? The Wizarding world is very backwards when it comes to a great deal of things. Parchment and quills went out of style over a hundred years ago for muggles. Pens work much better and you don't have to keep re-inking them every few lines as if you would with a quill. If I could

have used them at Hogwarts during classes, I would have done so.” Hermione finished her monologue, climbing down from her proverbial soapbox.

“Oh, I agree. I hate quills and parchment too.” Harry said with a tone of amusement in his voice.

When Hermione was finished copying down the contents of the tapestry, they headed up to inspect the items that Dumbledore left for him. Once inside the vault, they found a box containing the Sword of Gryffindor, a few memories in glass vials, a children’s book, and Dumbledore’s pensive.

Carefully packing the items into a bag, Harry and Hermione made their way to the last vault containing the items Petunia had put into storage all those years ago. Inside the last vault, Harry found his parents school trunks, a few books, and some photos of them while they were in school. He pocketed their photos and a journal that he found in his mother’s trunk before exiting the vault to return to the surface.

Once they were all seated in the conference room, Griphook produced the paperwork to make out a will and gave it to Harry.

He quickly filled out the paperwork and made Hermione his primary beneficiary and the Weasley family the minor beneficiaries should anything happen to him. Harry planned to tell Hermione what he had done once they were away from the bank so she would not try to force him to change his will.

Picking up the bank draft for ten million pounds sterling, Harry turned to Hermione and said, “Let’s get to a bank in London so we can deposit this. What bank do your parents use?”

“I think that they use a couple of different banks actually. Barclay’s is one of them and I think that the Royal Bank of Scotland is the other.” Hermione answered. “I think that I remember a branch of Barclay’s being nearby and I know that the Royal Bank of Scotland has a couple of branches in London too.”

Motioning towards the door, Harry said, "Let's head over to Barclay's then. However, I think that we should go to one that isn't near Diagon Alley. I don't want to be seen going into a muggle bank by anyone from the Wizarding world and I think that we should keep this secret. What about one of the branches near your parent's house?" Harry asked her.

"That's a brilliant idea Harry." Hermione said excitedly. "I'll apparate us over to my parent's house and they can drive us to the bank. That way no one will think it out of the ordinary. When we are done we can have dinner with my parent's before getting you back to the Dursley's house."

Nodding in agreement, Harry held the door for her and they headed off towards the exit together.

Chapter 8: Meet the Grangers.

Ile Expelo – entrail exploding curse. Latin. Ile means intestines and expelo means to expel with force.

With a small pop, Harry and Hermione arrived in the back yard of her parent's house. Walking up to, the back door Hermione pulled out her key to let them in.

Harry paused at the entrance to the door and closed his eyes briefly as if gathering himself for something.

Realizing that Harry had stopped following her, Hermione turned to see Harry standing in the door with his eyes closed. Tentatively she called out to him, "Harry, are you okay?"

After a few seconds, Harry's eyes snapped open and he spoke in a barely controlled voice "Why aren't there any wards on your house?"

"What!" Hermione shouted. "Dumbledore said that he had wards placed on the house last year to protect my parents." Hermione was somewhere between panic and anger, she had trusted in Dumbledore to protect her family and he had obviously failed to do as he had promised. "Do wards fall when the caster dies?" she asked, grasping at straws.

"No." was the only word that Harry muttered in a resigned voice as he stepped into the kitchen and closed the back door. "We need to get your parents out of here and then come back and ward this house properly. I know that there are some books on warding at number 12." After a brief pause Harry called out, "Kreacher."

There was a small pop and the old Black Family elf appeared in front of Harry. "Master called and Kreacher has obeyed." Muttered the elf in a low tone of voice.

Harry bit back his anger at the old elf, realizing that he had been a victim of his environment, more so than he was himself. "Please bring me the warding book from the library and put this back on the shelf in

the drawing room.” Harry told Kreacher as he drew out RAB’s fake Horcrux.

Kreacher’s eyes bulged out when he saw the locket and he exclaimed “Mistresses missing locket! Master Regulus took the locket and hid it years ago.” wailed Kreacher.

Taken aback by what Kreacher had just revealed, Harry looked over at Hermione and knew that she had realized who RAB was as well. Turning back to the excited elf Harry knelt down and spoke softly, “Kreacher, I found this locket in a cave full of Inferi.” The look of pure terror on the tiny elf’s face was all the confirmation that Harry needed. Kreacher knew where the locket had been located. He opened the locket and removed the not from Regulus and closed the clasp. “Kreacher, I want you to have this, I know that it means a lot to you.”

“Master is giving Kreacher Mistress Black’s necklace?”

“Yes.” And with that, Harry extended his hand with the locket resting on his palm. “It’s a gift for your loyal years of service to the family.”

Kreacher’s entire demeanor changed instantly. He stood up to his full height and accepted the necklace with a look of reverence on his face. Still looking at the locket in awe Kreacher spoke in a soft voice that Harry had to strain to hear. “Master has given Kreacher a most precious gift.” With a small pop Kreacher disappeared leaving Harry and Hermione staring at the spot that he had just vacated.

“That went...well I think.” said Harry pensively.

“You did a good thing for Kreacher Harry. I don’t think that he has ever really been shown any kindness or been given a gift before.” Hermione said thoughtfully.

A small pop announced Kreacher’s return. He looked completely different. The filthy loincloth had been replaced by a clean tea towel toga complete with the Black family crest on the left shoulder. “Here is the book that Master has requested.”

Taking the book Harry thanked the elf. Just as he was about to dismiss him Harry had another thought. "Kreacher, is there a way to secure the house so only people that I grant access to will be allowed to enter?"

The predatory look on Kreacher's face was a bit alarming to Harry and Hermione. "Yes Master. There is a way to keep the house secure."

"Good. Please lock the house down for now. I don't want anyone but you, me, and Hermione to be able to get in this house right now. Make sure that whatever you do will not kill anyone, stunning is fine though. Has anyone removed anything from the house recently?" Harry asked.

Kreacher's ears drooped and he shuffled his feet before answering. "Nasty thief took the sliver from the dining room as well as some items from the drawing room."

Harry knew that it was Mundungus that the elf was referring to, and he was seeing red. "Kreacher, I want you to fetch Mundungus Fletcher and lock him in a secure room in the basement. Make sure he can't escape and then come find me when I'm alone or with Hermione."

With a gleam in his eyes, Kreacher bowed and vanished to complete his task.

"You know, I'm not sure I would want to be Mundungus right about now." Harry said thoughtfully.

"Right, let me get my parents and then we can go to the bank."

Taking a seat on the couch in the living room Harry took in his surroundings. There were numerous photos of Hermione and her parents scattered throughout the room. He could almost feel the love in the house and it made him feel the loss of his parent's and Sirius all over again. The Granger's house felt warm and inviting, unlike the overbearing presence that he felt at the Burrow.

Harry was still lost in his thoughts when Hermione returned with her parents in tow. "Mom, Dad. This is Harry Potter."

"I'm pleased to meet you. You have a lovely home." Harry said as he shook each of their hands.

"Thank you. It is good to finally meet you Harry. I'm Annabelle and this is John. Hermione mentioned that you needed our help with something?"

"Yes, ma'am. I need to open an account at a local bank and we need to set up some protection for your house."

"Protection?" Mr. Granger looked taken aback for a moment before turning to Hermione. "Didn't your headmaster, Dumbledore, do something about that last year?"

"Actually, he didn't." said Harry in a clipped tone. He then explained to Hermione's parents about not feeling any wards around the house when he entered. "Dumbledore either delegated the job to someone else and that person forgot or he purposely didn't place them. My best guess is that he felt that his efforts were better spent elsewhere so he just didn't put them up. This is all just speculation of course but based upon his prior actions it all fits. However, he's dead and now the job has fallen to Hermione and me to secure your house."

The Grangers were more than a little shocked and it shown in their facial expressions. "Who are you going to get to secure our house?" asked Mrs. Granger.

"Hermione is going to put up some wards tonight and then after my birthday I will come by and place a few more, with your permission of course."

"Harry got a book from his home on warding the property. I can cast most of the spells but a few of the wards needs someone with more power to cast them properly. That's why Harry will have to perform certain spells." Hermione told her parents.

“After all of the wards are set I would also like to put the home under the Fidelius charm with Hermione as the secret keeper. You will have to get your post forwarded to a different address or a post office box.” Harry’s gaze drifted over to Hermione and she gave him a small nod of approval. Looking back at her parents Harry continued; “It would be best if you could close your practice and leave the country. If you can’t do that, at least consider a new location and career. You are both very important to Hermione and this war will come to your front door eventually.”

“Mum. Dad. Please pack a bag for tonight so we can secure the house before you return home.”

Hermione’s parents were standing there; too shocked to respond. Being told that you would eventually be a target in your own home is not something that is easy to comprehend. Stepping up to her parents, Hermione threw her arms around her mother and quietly spoke; “Please do this for me. I want you both to be safe. I don’t think that I could bear it if either of you were killed to get to me.” Hermione had tears in her eyes when she finished speaking. Looking up at her father, she held his gaze for a few moments before he nodded in understanding.

“Come on Annabelle; let’s go pack a bag for the next few days.” John had his arm around his wife’s shoulders as he led her towards their bedroom.

Harry watched silently as Hermione’s parents went to pack. Shifting his attention to Hermione, he noticed that she was hugging herself while standing in the middle of the room. Without a word, he strode over to her, took her in his arms, and whispered into her ear; “It’s okay Hermione. We will do everything that we can to protect your parents.”

Sniffing slightly Hermione answered; “I know. I am just worried about what will happen in the future. I’m going to get started on those wards before they get back. May I see your warding book please?”

By the time that her parents had come back downstairs, she had finished putting up a few minor safety wards and a monitoring charm and keyed everyone into them. "Are you ready to go mum?"

"Yes, we packed enough for the week in case it takes you longer than you originally thought to secure the house. We can talk about our options at the hotel later. Where would you like to go first Harry?"

"To the bank, please. I don't know how long it will take to open a new account. After that, perhaps a late lunch, and then we head back to the hotel."

The ride to the bank was a comfortable one for Harry. He was positive that his Uncle Vernon would be extremely jealous of the brand new 5-series BMW that he was currently riding in. Upon arriving at the bank, Harry assumed that it worked the same way as Gringotts did so he got in line to see a teller.

"I would like to open a new account." Harry told the teller once it was his turn.

The teller looked up at the poorly dressed teen in front of her and silently started getting the necessary paperwork together. She passed the papers to Harry and asked him to fill them out. It took Harry a few minutes to convince Hermione to allow him to put her on the access list for the account. She finally relented when Harry pointed out that she was the only person that he would trust with his money and that she could blend in perfectly because of her upbringing. "I mean, honestly, could you see Ron trying to access a muggle bank account?"

Harry gave the paperwork back to the teller and she asked him "How much would you like to deposit into your new account?" Harry slid the certified bank draft from Gringotts to the teller as he smiled at her. The teller picked up the check and stared at it in shock. She looked up at Harry with a gob smacked expression on her face. "Umm...I need to get a bank manager to help you out. Accounts of this size are handled by a different department."

The teller came back a few moments later with a thin, middle-aged, man in a pin stripped suit that reminded Harry of Barty Crouch, Sr. but with a friendlier personality. "I'm Mr. Thompson, one of the managers. Please follow me Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger."

Out in the lobby Hermione's parents were surprised that the bank manager was handling Harry's account. "How large of a deposit was Harry making John?"

"I'm not sure but I do know that the manager's only handle accounts over a million pounds. Hermione mentioned an inheritance so I guess that it was rather large."

Back in the office, Mr. Thompson was going over Harry's account, and how to invest. "How much available cash would you like to have versus what you have invested Mr. Potter?"

I think that one million in cash and the rest invested in such a way that I could get easy access to it if I needed it right away." Harry said after a brief consultation with Hermione.

"Would it be possible to also get credit and ATM cards Mr. Thompson?" Hermione asked him.

"Of course you can. I'll have them ready for you in a few minutes." Mr. Thompson said and then he relayed the request to his assistant.

As they were wrapping everything up Mr. Thompson gave Harry a folder with his account information and some additional investment options if he wanted to make any changes to his account.

They were met in the lobby by Mr. Thompson's assistant where she handed over their new credit and ATM cards. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you Mr. Potter. Please give me a call if you have any questions about your account." Mr. Thompson said as he shook both of their hands.

"Thank you." Chorused Harry & Hermione and they made their way over to where her parents were seated in the lobby.

Hermione's parents stood up to meet them and Mrs. Granger asked, "All set?" After receiving a confirming nod from both teens, she continued. "Let's head out for lunch then."

"That would be great. I've never eaten out in a restaurant outside of Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade before."

Hermione and her parents all paused at Harry's unintentional confession about his home life before Mrs. Granger spoke again. "Well, that settles that then. I know just the place to eat providing that you like Italian food."

"I do. Am I going to be dressed okay?" Harry asked, obviously a bit uncomfortable about going to a restaurant dressed in the clothes that he was wearing.

Taking in his attire the Grangers realized that Harry's clothes were all too big on him and they looked quite worn. Mrs. Granger looked over at her daughter and realized that this was a sore subject for her daughter. She chose her words carefully before speaking. "Actually, Harry you are both underdressed. Why don't we stop by the mall and pick up a new outfit for each of you?"

Harry hesitated for a moment before he saw the hopeful look on Hermione's face. "Thank you. That would be great."

Hermione beamed at Harry and her mother as she looped her arms around her arms through theirs and dragging them back to the car.

Two hours, and a complete wardrobe for Harry, later they arrived at Franco's Italian Restaurant. "I'm famished. Who would have thought that shopping for clothes would work up such an appetite?" Harry said once they were seated at a private table in the corner of the restaurant.

John Granger smiled at Harry's enthusiasm. "That was a very short shopping trip that you just experienced Harry. It can take hours when the girls hit their stride."

“Really?” Harry asked. When he looked at everyone, he realized that Hermione and her mother were a bit pink with embarrassment and a touch of playful annoyance while Mr. Granger was nodding yes in answer to his question.

After pondering that revelation for a moment Harry said; “I had fun and it really wasn’t that bad.”

Both female Grangers beamed at him while Mr. Granger looked alarmed. John leaned over to Harry and stage whispered “You aren’t supposed to admit that Harry.”

Hermione and her mother broke out into giggles and she said to Harry “We can do more shopping this week if you want Harry.”

“That would be great!” Harry said earnestly.

John coughed “Traitor.” Under his breath while looking at Harry and that sent the rest of the table into fits of laughter.

When it came time to pay the bill Harry asked if he could pick up the check.

“Nonsense, Harry. You are helping to keep us safe and that means more to us than you will ever know. Mrs. Granger told Harry while taking his hands in hers.

“Thank you both. It was a wonderful meal and I really enjoyed myself.”

A couple of hours later Harry and Hermione were sitting at her parents dining room table discussing the wards that she had just erected and the days events.

“I think that we should come add an Unplottable ward and perhaps a blood ward or two before you add the Fidelius charm. That way the ministry wouldn’t be able to detect the use of magic in the house.”

“Okay, that’s settled then. I’ll add those on my birthday and then we can pick up Ron and try to figure out where we are going to start our search for the remaining Horcruxes.”

Chapter 6: The ties that bind.

Hermione and Harry retreated to the drawing room of Grimmauld Place and they were each nursing a beer and relaxing after their long day. She was surprised that Harry had reverted to his natural form but chose not to comment on the development. If she were being truthful with herself, she was very pleased that Harry was comfortable enough around her to not hide behind one of his many masks.

Breaking the comfortable silence with her lilting voice, she said, "Harry, I think that you should leave the Dursley's before your seventeenth birthday." When he didn't respond, she took that as a clue to continue with her train of thought, "The Death Eaters know where you live during the summer and they will probably be waiting for you the moment that your mother's protection ends."

Harry nodded his head in acceptance of her theory and replied, "I have been thinking something along the same lines. I should probably move in here permanently and we can redo some of the wards once I'm seventeen." Seeing the look of concern on her face, he quickly added, "You and your parents are welcome to stay here if you don't feel like your house is safe enough after we put the rest of the wards up."

"Thank you." Hermione said as she beamed at him for his offer. She looked around the drawing room, lost in thoughts of what they needed to do in order to get ready for the daunting task that was in front of them. After a few moments, she said softly, "I've been thinking about what we need to gather for the Horcrux hunt."

Torn from his thoughts at the mention of the Horcrux hunt, Harry looked into Hermione's bright cinnamon colored eyes and said in a gravelly voice, "So have I. We need a sure fire way to destroy the Horcuxes without activating their protections. The best thing that I can think of is a Basilisk fang and that means that we have to sneak into the Chamber of Secrets."

"Do you want to do that tomorrow and then head over to The Burrow?" Seeing the brief flicker of emotion in his eyes, she hastily said, "I know that you don't want to hurt Ginny's feelings, but it will be

better in the long run if you get it over and done with sooner rather than later.” Hermione reached out and clasped Harry’s hand in hers and said softly, “I’ll be there with you the whole time.”

Harry gave her a small smile and said, “Thanks. I’d like that.” Looking down at his watch, he realized that it was getting quite late and Hermione must be exhausted, he stood up and held a hand out for Hermione and said, “You must be tired after all of that casting, why don’t we turn in for the evening?”

She accepted his help up and they headed upstairs together. When they reached the second floor Harry turned towards the room that he normally shared with Ron during the summers and she silently followed him into the room.

Surprised that she had entered the room with him, Harry said in confusion, “Um, what are you doing?”

Hermione looked at Harry and said simply, “I’m going to sleep and I don’t like the idea of sleeping alone in this house.”

“Oh. Well, which bed would you like?” Harry asked while he rubbed the back of his neck, slightly nervous for some reason.

To his surprise, she chose the bed that he usually slept in when they were in residence. He looked at her sheepish expression and the light pink blush on her cheeks and gave her a smile and with a wave of his hand towards Ron’s bed, he said, “Don’t worry, I don’t blame you for not wanting to sleep in this orange covered bed either. Ron’s taste in colors and Quidditch teams is absolutely horrible.”

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand to help muffle her giggle. She ducked her head slightly to help hide her blush. Softly, she said, “Thanks. I don’t like the color orange that much either.” What she wasn’t telling him was the other reason she chose his bed.

During their sixth year Professor Slughorn had a cauldron of Amortentia brewing in class she identified the third smell in the cauldron as something that reminded her solely of Harry. It was why she blushed and refused to mention what smells she associated with

the potion during class. In fact, she had never told another soul about her love for Harry.

Realizing that Hermione was lost in her own thoughts, Harry quietly excused himself and headed towards the bathroom to get ready for bed. When he returned to their room, he found the room empty but the bed covers on his bed were no longer orange. They had been changed to the familiar colors of Gryffindor. Smiling at Hermione's thoughtfulness, he removed his shirt and climbed into bed.

Hermione was just returning to their room and was greeted to the sight of a shirtless Harry Potter climbing into bed. She watched him climb into bed before making her way completely into the room.

Harry heard Hermione come into the room and was just about to say goodnight when his mind caught up with what his eyes were seeing. Hermione was wearing a burgundy, knee length, sleeveless nightgown with spaghetti straps. It accentuated her figure in ways that made him extremely thankful that he was already under the covers.

Hermione saw the look on Harry's face and gave him a radiant smile that made her even more beautiful. Climbing into her own bed, she purred, "Goodnight, Harry. Sleep well." With a wave of her wand, she turned out the lights and lay down.

"Goodnight, Hermione." Harry managed to say without his voice breaking. She had her hair down and when she turned around to climb into bed and he could see her bare back. He was pretty sure that it was the same back as the woman in his dreams. Shaking his head in the darkness, he couldn't believe that he had never put the pieces together before.

She had been right in front of him for years and it had taken a set of dreams to make him realize it. Not knowing what to do about this revelation at the moment, Harry decided to try and get some sleep and perhaps deal with it in the morning.

Hermione was lying in Harry's bed with a huge smile on her face as she thought about the look on his face when he saw her. As she

drifted off to sleep, her dreams were filled with images of her best friend dancing in her head.

The sun's rays were shining in through the window onto the face of a sleeping Harry Potter. The unusual thing was that his face was relaxed; the stress lines that were usually present had been replaced by a small smile that was almost angelic.

Hermione awoke at first light and had spent the past thirty minutes Harry watching. She usually indulged in this practice during the school year. It was the first time that she had ever watched him sleeping outside of the Hogwarts Hospital Wing and it brought a small smile to her face.

Deciding that she should get ready for the day, she silently slipped out of bed and grabbed a fresh set of clothes and softly padded to the bathroom. As she passed by Harry, she stopped momentarily and slowly reached out and ran her fingers gently through his fringe. After she brushed his hair out of his eyes, she lovingly cupped his cheek before heading off to take a shower.

Harry was in that peaceful state somewhere in between sleep and wakefulness. He had been having 'The Dream' again but this time it wasn't preceded by his usual nightmares. As the beautiful woman began singing softly to the baby in her arms, Harry was pulled from his dream by that very same voice coming from the bathroom.

Sitting up in bed slowly, he let Hermione's lilting singing wash over him. This was all the confirmation that he needed to verify that it was Hermione in his dreams. Harry was so wrapped up in her singing that he didn't realize that he had unconsciously closed his eyes and was slightly swaying with a smile on his face.

Hermione stepped back into their room fully dressed and singing softly as she towelled her hair dry. She was so lost in her own little world that she forgot that Harry was still in the room. When she realized that Harry was there she almost let out a yelp of surprise before she got a good look at him.

He was sitting there with his eyes closed with a hint of a smile playing at the edges of his lips. His voice was so soft that Hermione almost missed it when he said, "So beautiful."

Her reply stuck in her throat when Harry opened his eyes. His bright emerald pools were glistening with tears but he had the largest smile that she had seen on his face since their first year at Hogwarts.

Warmly, he said, "You sing beautifully."

"You could hear me?" Hermione squeaked in embarrassment as the blush crept down her neck. When he nodded, she groaned, hung her head, and mumbled, "I'm sorry, I know it must have been horrible. You don't have to lie to me and tell me that you liked it."

Surprised at her uncharacteristic outburst, Harry quickly stood up and enveloped her in a hug while whispering in her ear, "I wasn't lying. You have an amazing voice."

Stunned by his admission, Hermione pulled back from the embrace and looked into his eyes. Seeing nothing but love and acceptance, she simply said, "Thanks." When she realized how nervous Harry was, she frowned slightly and asked him, "What's the matter?"

Harry was nervously twisting the hem of his shirt in his hands as he struggled with how he was going to tell her about his dreams. Seeing the look of concern on her face, he quickly said, "I have something that I want you to see." He grasped her hand and led her to the library where the Black Family Pensieve was kept.

He opened the cabinet, removed the Pensieve and set it on the coffee table in front of Hermione. He put the tip of his wand to his temple and began withdrawing every memory he possessed of the dreams about her and the baby. When he was finished, he looked into her questioning eyes and said softly, "I want you to take a look at these memories and I'll answer any questions that you may have when you are finished."

Curious, and a touch concerned, Hermione stood up and approached the Pensieve. Taking a deep breath to fortify her courage, she

plunged her face into the swirling mass of silver memories. It took her a few seconds to get her bearings before she realized that she was seeing Harry's dreams.

The first couple of memories stirred the feeling that she should know the woman in the dream. When she reached the memory of Harry listening to the woman sing to the baby, it all clicked in her head and she started to hyperventilate slightly.

Tears of joy began streaming down her face as she saw the look on his face as he approached her and placed a hand on her shoulder and she leaned into his touch in the memory of his dream. When the last memory played out, she was ejected from the Pensieve and immediately launched herself into Harry's arms with tears still streaming down her face.

"Oh, Harry." She whispered as she clung to him. When she felt him relax and return her embrace, Hermione leaned back just enough to see his face. He looked nervous and scared at the same time and she did the only thing that she could think of to relieve his fears. She leaned in and kissed him full on the lips, pouring all of her love for him into the embrace.

They separated thirty seconds later both of them slightly blushing before Harry leaned down and pressed his forehead to hers while maintaining eyes contact with Hermione. Seeing nothing but love within her cinnamon colored eyes, Harry smiled and leaned down and kissed her tenderly.

Pleased with Harry's reaction to her kiss, Hermione was a little surprised when he returned the favor a little while later. Loosing herself in the moment, she pressed her body firmly into his and deepened the kiss.

Neither teen was aware of the passage of time because they were so wrapped up in each other that nothing else mattered. For those wonderful moments there was no more prophecy, Voldemort, or the Wizarding World. It was just two people realizing that they were in love and had been for years but neither of them had been brave enough to take that final step and start a relationship.

Now that both of their feelings for each other were in the open, things were going to change. For the first time that Harry or Hermione could ever remember, they both felt complete and comfortable with their places in life.

For Harry, this feeling was why he would fight. He wanted that dream to become reality more than anything and he would do everything in his considerable power to make it come true. Just thinking about Hermione and starting a family filled him with a feeling that took a moment for him to define. Realizing what it was that he was feeling, Harry reluctantly broke the kiss and looked into Hermione's bright eyes and said warmly, "I love you, Hermione. I have for years but I was too scared to say anything in case it would ruin our friendship."

Elated, and a little nervous, Hermione asked softly, "What changed?"

Harry reached up with one of his hands and brushed a lock of hair away from her cheek as he continued to hold her gaze. In a soft voice full of longing, he said, "I realized that I want a family more than anything and that I want to share that with you."

Tears streaming down her face, Hermione smiled at him and said, "I love you too, Harry. I have since our first year but never said anything for pretty much the same reasons."

The couple embraced again, each of them relishing the feeling of love and how right the hug felt. Hermione discovered that she fit perfectly in Harry's arms when he was in his natural form. Her chin settled into the crook of his neck and she decided to take advantage of the face by placing a few light kisses down his neck.

Harry was concentrating on his feelings for Hermione when he felt her begin to kiss his neck. A soft growl escaped his lips and he practically hissed, "Hermione." in pleasure as she continued to trail kisses down his neck and collarbone.

Suddenly, he felt a shiver run down his spine that had nothing to do with Hermione's ministrations. Someone was trying to enter the house and the wards were denying entrance. He disentangled

himself from Hermione and put a finger to his mouth indicating silence as he quickly reverted back into his public persona.

Hermione realized that something was wrong when Harry morphed back into the small form that everyone was used to seeing. When he indicated that she should remain quiet, she drew her wand and followed him towards the disturbance.

They reached the kitchen and the source of the disturbance was immediately recognizable. Stuck in the fireplace was the head of Mundungus Fletcher. "Stun him." Harry said immediately and a moment later, the telltale red of a stunner impacted upon Fletcher's head.

Reaching down, Harry yanked Fletcher through the fireplace and into the kitchen. He reset the ward on the fireplace and then hefted Mundungus into a chair where Hermione used a spell to tie him up securely.

Harry was ghosting his hands across Fletcher's body looking for magical objects. He began removing everything that he found and placing it on the table next to Hermione. He had already removed quite a few items that he recognized as coming from the shelves lining the drawing room. With a feeling of triumph, he practically shouted, "Aha!" Very carefully, he removed the dark object from a hidden pocket in the side of Fletcher's robes.

"What is it?" Hermione asked while looking at the seemingly innocent brooch.

Grimly, Harry said, "Oh yes. I'm looking forward to destroying this thing." Turning the dark object over in his hands, "This is a Horcrux. The problem is that it doesn't belong to Voldemort. The magic feels different."

Hermione was stunned that someone else had made a Horcrux. The shock of the discovery made her realize that Voldemort had to gain the knowledge of how to make them somewhere so it was only logical that they could possibly find a Horcrux that belonged to someone else during their search. The fact that there were two of them in the

possession of the Black's made her realize just how much the family had lived up to their last name.

Harry looked up at Hermione while she was lost deep in thought. Making a decision, he stepped back from Fletcher's unconscious body and called out, "Kreacher."

There was a pop of displaced air as Kreacher materialized in the room. Bowing to Harry, he croaked, "Master called and Kreacher has answered. What can Kreacher do for master?"

"Hello, Kreacher. Would you please fetch me some Veritaserum?" Harry asked kindly.

"Yes, Master Harry." Kreacher croaked before popping away to complete his order.

Turning to face Mundungus, Harry withdrew Dumbledore's old wand and vanished his clothes. Making sure that there was nothing else magical on the thief, Harry conjured a blanket to cover him with before waking him up.

Comprehension dawned on Mundungus' face when he saw Harry Potter looking at him with loathing. Looking around frantically, he noticed that the only other person present was the Granger girl. Eyes wide with fear, he stammered, "P...P...Potter! What are you doing here?"

Retrieving the vial of Veritaserum from Kreacher, Harry said, "Thank you, Kreacher." Stepping over to the restrained thief, he yanked back his unkempt hair and poured three drops of the potion down his throat. Once he was sure that it had taken effect, he asked, "Who do you work for?"

Eyes glazed over, Fletcher slurred in a monotone, "I work for myself."

Turning back to Hermione, Harry said, "Do you have any questions for him?"

Hermione's eyes bore into Mundungus as she formulated her questions. "How long have you been stealing things from this house?" she asked as she sat down on a chair across from him.

"Since Sirius opened the house up to the Order." Fletcher answered immediately.

Harry growled deep in his throat in anger at the thief. He couldn't understand why Dumbledore trusted this man so he asked him and was quite surprised by his answer.

"I helped Dumbledore retrieve something with no questions asked." Mundungus said in the now familiar monotone of the potion induced haze.

Curious, Hermione asked him, "What was it?"

"I never asked. I just stole it and gave it to Professor Dumbledore." Fletcher replied as the sweat began to trickle down his forehead from the potion's effects.

"Unbelievable." Harry muttered as he began pacing the room. Coming to a decision, he whipped out his wand, pointed it at Mundungus, and intoned, "Obliviate! You were unable to enter headquarters and didn't see anyone through the floo." His instructions complete, Harry stunned the petty thief.

Facing his house-elf, Harry said, "Please drop him off at his flat and then return here. We don't need him anymore."

Kreacher bowed once and grabbed the unconscious man and disappeared with a pop, leaving the two teens alone in the house.

Harry stood up and led her out of the kitchen. Once they were outside of the room, he silenced the doors so no one would be able to hear anything if they tried to enter the house or make a floo call.

Once they were back in the drawing room, Hermione immediately asked, "How come you didn't get an owl for using magic in the kitchen?"

Chuckling at her question, Harry smiled and said, "Magic use can't be detected in this house, or most Pureblood homes, due to the wards. Remember what I told you in the bank?"

"Oh." Hermione said before her face starting turning red with indignation and embarrassment before she blurted, "You mean we could have been practicing and cleaning this house with magic the last time that we were here?"

Nodding, Harry solemnly said, "Yup. The real question is why didn't they tell us that?"

Hermione flopped down on the couch and stared into the fire burning merrily in the unconnected fireplace. After a few moments silence, she said, "I don't understand why they wouldn't let us use magic."

Harry sat down next to her and draped an arm around her shoulders in comfort. A couple of seconds later, he calmly said, "It's about control and dependency. If we can't use magic except at school until we are seventeen that makes us dependent upon the adults or anyone else in a position of power."

"But that's..." Hermione spluttered, completely at a loss for words as one of her beliefs in authority figures and adults were shattered.

Understanding her plight all too well, Harry kissed the side of her head and whispered into her ear, "I'm sorry that I had to be the one to break that to you. Unfortunately, I learned that lesson as a very small child."

Hermione shifted in her seat so she could look at Harry properly, concern and curiosity warring on her features.

Before she could ask, Harry whispered in a voice full of emotion, "I stopped truly trusting adults long before I came to Hogwarts." Dreading the question that he knew she was about to ask, Harry decided to preemptively answered her. His voice had gotten even softer as he spoke of his childhood for the first time, "My teachers never seemed to wonder why I was dressed in rags when my cousin,

who was in the same class, always had nice clothes. They also never said anything about my much more meager lunches when compared to Dudley.”

“Oh, Harry. How come you never mentioned this to anyone before?” Hermione asked in a tremulous voice as she pulled him into a hug.

His answer was so soft that Hermione almost missed it when he said, “Dumbledore knew and I think he did something to prevent people from asking too many questions about me or my situation.” Harry’s next statement brought tears to Hermione’s eyes, “Did you know that my first Hogwarts letter was addressed to my cupboard under the stairs?”

Stunned, Hermione had no words to offer Harry, she could only give her support. So she did the only thing that she could think of, she pulled him down into her arms and buried his head into her shoulder and began gently rubbing his back.

Harry had no recollection of ever being held like this before and the loving gesture of support cracked the dam of his resolve and his tears began to soak into Hermione’s jumper.

His quiet sobs were barely audible above the crackling of the fire and Hermione wondered what the Dursley’s had done to him to make him so afraid of crying. Deciding to leave that issue for later, she settled for continuing to offer her love and support. She kissed the side of his head and whispered, “It’s going to be okay. I love you.”

A muffled, “I love you too.” was Harry’s only response as he clung to Hermione with a desperate strength.

For the rest of the morning they sat entwined on the couch in the drawing room as Harry finally opened up and told her everything about his childhood. By the time he was finished with his story, both of them were exhausted.

Kreacher would discover them later that afternoon sleeping together on the couch in each other’s embrace. He covered them with a

blanket and silently left the room to begin preparing a light dinner for them.

